



Volume 9, Number 6

March 26, 2015

## The Islamic State and its “Sinai Province”

Aymenn J. Al-Tamimi

In November 2014, the Gaza-Sinai jihadist group *Jama‘at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (JABM: “Supporters of the Holy House,” i.e. Jerusalem) pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). The IS’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially acknowledged JABM’s pledge as the creation of a new “Sinai Province” (*Wilayat Sinai*), alongside other recently proclaimed IS provinces in Yemen, Libya, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.

The IS leadership’s acknowledgment of these pledges of allegiance and annulment of the groups’ previous identities reflect its calculation that those who have pledged allegiance to the IS can give the IS brand a viable military presence and ultimately a state-like representation in the area in question. Another key part of the development of the IS presence in an area is the media output from the newly established ‘media office’ for the IS province, or from unofficial social media accounts.

Two examples against which the new Sinai Province can be assessed are the cases of Libya and India. The Indian jihadi group *Tanzim Ansar al-Tawheed*, which in May 2014 initially appealed for help to both al-Qa‘ida and what was then called the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), pledged allegiance to IS in October 2014.

However, there has been no official acknowledgment of this pledge or an announcement of a newly created “India Province” of the Islamic State. This is likely because the IS deems the group too insignificant to have any impact in a territory as vast as India. As a result, the group is merely limited to propaganda work for the IS via its media outlet, al-Isabah Media, [translating the IS media releases into Indian languages](#).

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the “Cyrenaica Province” (*Wilayat Barqa*) of the Islamic State in the eastern Libyan city of Derna, which has developed IS state-like institutions based on the model of IS governance in Iraq and Syria, including a *Diwan al-Hisbah* (enforcing Islamic morality),<sup>1</sup> [a \*Diwan al-Ta’aleem\* \(education\)](#) and a [a \*Diwan al-Awqaf wa al-Masajid\* \(religious outreach and control of mosques\)](#). Although the IS is not the only jihadist faction in Derna, the emergence of these administrative departments, together with the fact that the IS appears to be able to carry out its trademark acts of destruction with impunity,<sup>2</sup> would seem to suggest that the IS is becoming dominant in Derna.

The Sinai Province of the IS falls somewhere along this spectrum. The official media releases suggest that the IS in Sinai is a military force, but do not indicate that it controls substantial contiguous territory or meaningful towns in which the IS can claim it administers state-like governance.

For example, one set of Sinai Province photos shows an IS convoy of vehicles conveying IS fighters through open country roads and small residential areas<sup>3</sup> – nothing analogous to the parades IS has held inside major Iraqi cities and towns. As far as actual military operations, they resemble those carried out by JABM prior to its pledge to the IS, such as low-scale IED and mortar attacks and attacks on gas pipelines.<sup>4</sup> A more impressive set of operations took place in late January this year, in which simultaneous attacks were carried out in El Arish, Sheikh Zuweid, and Rafah.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [“Photo report on the work of the \*Diwan al-Hisbah\* in \*Wilayat Barqa\*,”](#) *Wilayat Barqa*, January 16, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> [“The men of al-Hisbah destroy one of the status in the town of Derna,”](#) *Wilayat Barqa*, January 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> [“Photo Report: Military Parade by the Soldiers of the Islamic Caliphate in \*Wilayat Sinai\* in the Clearness of Day,”](#) *Wilayat Sinai*, March 1, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, [“The Land of Sinai- New Islamic State \*Nasheed\* from \*Ajnad Media\*,”](#) January 16, 2015. The dedication of a *nasheed* by IS’s official outlet for the production of *nasheeds* to the subject of the jihad in Sinai is notable. The content of the *nasheed* refers to military operations, not the establishment of state-like structures.

<sup>5</sup> [“Statement: series of operations: ‘We vow to take revenge,’”](#) *Wilayat Sinai*, January 29, 2015.

On the unofficial level, a document dated February 17, 2015 has emerged titled “Appeal to Our Dignified Tribes in Sinai,” in which the leadership of Sinai Province urged locals not to collaborate with people associated with the Egyptian government. It also emphasizes their many grievances, particularly the Egyptian armed forces’ alleged excesses, including “burning of their [the Muslims’] bodies and destruction of mosques and homes,” while portraying President Sisi as an agent of the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is as yet no indication of IS state or proto-state bodies in the Sinai Province. There are no IS ‘diwans’ or even a Shari’a Committee in Sinai, in contrast to what has emerged in at least one of IS’s Yemen provinces. There is what one might describe as ‘proto-Hisbah’ (Shari’a law enforcement), which includes the burning of cannabis plants seized during ambushes.<sup>7</sup> This development should not be surprising given the pervasive drug smuggling in Sinai.

The heavy-handed behavior of Egyptian security forces, the coup against the Morsi government in July 2013, and the marginalization of the Bedouin all played a role in perpetuating the jihadi insurgency in Sinai. The Morsi coup has arguably been the most important factor in diverting Sinai jihadism away from Israel (which was the initial target, as initially implied with the ‘Holy House’ references) to the Sisi government in Egypt, which is perceived as *taghut* – an ‘idolatrous tyranny.’ How will this shift contribute to the prospects of the Islamic State’s Sinai Province?

One of the problems facing the Sinai Province is that the pro-IS groups in the broader Gaza-Sinai area display a notable lack of unity. Signs of pro-ISIS sentiment in Gaza-Sinai first emerged on social media in late summer 2013 and continued into the following year. By 2014, JABM had issued a statement taking ISIS’s side in the infighting with Syrian rebels, and there emerged a recognizable Gazan contingent of ISIS fighters– the “Sheikh Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi Battalion,”<sup>8</sup> which most likely used Sinai as an initial transit space on its way to Syria.

Yet, the Caliphate declaration by ISIS on June 29, 2014 did not immediately galvanize Gaza-Sinai, as JABM still took some four months to make its pledge.

---

<sup>6</sup> [“Call/appeal to the our dignified tribes of Sinai,”](#) *Wilayat Sinai*, February 17, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> [“Photo report on the burning of cannabis drug plants seized during the implementation of ambushes,”](#) *Wilayat Sinai*, January 3, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, [“Muhajireen Battalions in Syria: Part III,”](#) *Syria Comment*, June 23, 2014.

During this period, JABM appeared to be pro-IS without actually pledging allegiance. As an ideological position, this is untenable, as the IS's demands for allegiance are absolute. It seems most likely that there was not a strong enough consensus to pledge allegiance to the IS within JABM until October 2014, with opinion likely divided between supporters, fence sitters, and opponents even as the IS was reaching out and making increasing overtures to JABM.<sup>9</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has argued that by October 2014 most of the leadership and senior ranks that opposed aligning with the IS had been killed off by Egyptian security forces,<sup>10</sup> paving the way for a viable agreement to be struck between JABM's pro-IS faction in Sinai and the Islamic State. This led to the unofficially released JABM statement at the beginning of November, which then forced any remaining fence sitters to take a stand. Hence the pledge of allegiance proclaimed by JABM's leader Abu Osama al-Masri was officially released just days later.

Other jihadi groups in the area have yet to pledge allegiance. The *Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen* (MSM) in October 2014 issued a statement of support (*Arabic: nusra*) for the IS against the U.S.-led coalition,<sup>11</sup> but has not followed through by joining the Sinai Province. At the same time, the pro-IS faction within MSM appears to be maintaining an activist front group in Gaza known as *al-Nusra al-Maqdisia* ('Maqdisi Support'),<sup>12</sup> but *nusra* is quite distinct from *bay'a* ('allegiance'), and as a result the group has drawn some criticism.<sup>13</sup> The existence of other pro-IS brands concentrated mainly in the Gaza area—such as *Jama'at Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bayt al-Maqdis*, *Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Ghaza*, and *Ansar al-Shari'a Ghaza*—might superficially suggest an actively coordinated IS presence in Gaza using multiple front groups. In reality, these brands are all distinct and highly localized, highlighting the inability of the pro-IS trend in Gaza to unite under one name or even one loose group identity and merge into the IS Sinai Province.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> [“Exclusive: Islamic State guides Egyptian militants, expanding its influence,” Reuters](#), September 5, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, [“ISIL’s International Expansion: What does Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis’s Oath of Allegiance Mean?”](#) *War on the Rocks*, February 25, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, [“Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen: Support for the Islamic State,” Syria Comment](#), October 10, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> I would like to thank “Mr. Orange” for this point.

<sup>13</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, [“Jihadi Debate over Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bayt al-Maqdis,”](#) January 2, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; corroborated by on-the-ground reporting from Asmaa al-Ghoul, “Islamic State rejected Gaza jihadists’ offer of allegiance,” [Al-Monitor](#), January 7, 2015.

In short, the Sinai Province remains primarily a serious terrorist threat rather than an IS contingent capable of seizing major population centers and instituting the kind of sophisticated IS administration that exists in Syria and Iraq. The lack of unity within the Gaza-Sinai pro-IS trend —together with the fact that the IS is coming under increasing pressure in Iraq and Syria (limiting the organization's ability to expand and provide support to affiliates abroad)—should ensure the continuation of the overall status quo in Sinai for the time being.

*Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi is a research fellow at the Rubin Center for International Affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center – Herzliya (IDC-Herzliya) and a fellow at the Middle East Forum. Aymenn's website is <http://www.aymennjawad.org>*

**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

**To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.**

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at  
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to [listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il](mailto:listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il), with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."